

Leaving the Clouds Behind

by Belinda Bekkers

His laughter bounced through the air that had become thick with our conversation and the humidity that condensed on our skin. He was as boisterous as the evening storm on the horizon, slowly making its way to where we sat on the back verandah. I sat quiet, like the dried-out earth, ready to soak up the memory this storm of a night would give me.

He had asked me to come visit before I left town. He would always be here of course, but he alone was not enough for me to stay in a place that stunted me; a place that was slowly suffocating me.

“You were always bigger than this place,” he told me, talking about the one street town we both called home.

“Thanks,” I said and curled the ends of my bob behind my ear. This man, with his life etched into his sun-worn skin, rarely spoke more than was necessary, but tonight was different.

He opened another beer and passed it across. The thunder became louder and his haphazard smile less frequent.

The sound of the rain creeping over the pasture towards us was growing louder. Each raindrop's loud thump could be heard as it hit the earth that hadn't felt water for months. It reminded me of the cattle musters I had observed over the years from this seat.

Then it was above us, hitting the roof with such ferocity that seemed like a punishment for living out here in the middle of nowhere. For twenty minutes, we sat there, slowly sipping our pale ales waiting for it to stop and silently counting the minutes until I left. Its approach had taken longer than it rained on us.

“I've got an early start tomorrow.” I said as I stood up and stretched. “I'll see you again soon, Dad.” I bent over and kissed his cheek. “I'll phone you and let you know when I've arrived.”

“You'll be back to visit someday. Won't you?” He yelled to me when I reached the boxes stacked to one side of the hallway, filled with the belongings infused with memories but not precious enough to find room for in my small hatchback. He kept staring off at the horizon from which the storm approached.

“Of course, Dad,” I yelled back.

A promise that we both knew was only filled with vacant hope.

The next morning, I woke in my childhood bed with faded pink walls that whispered their memories. The first kiss at age thirteen from the farmhand four years older. My mother getting sick. The kids my age in the district who never understood my desire to live behind a screen. My brother moving into the cottage, forever shackling himself to this place.

I dislodged the sleep out of the corner of my eyes, and loaded the washing machine with the rectangles of material from my bed worn thin from use. A chore I refused to leave for my father even though it was something he had insisted on the day before. I showered and brushed my teeth, packing my toiletries and remaining clothes into my overnight bag just as the machine finished its cycle. Hanging the sheets out on the washing line, I turned my face to the sky, soaking in the warmth.

I decided to make a cup of coffee for the road. That's when I saw the note, stuck to the handle of the kettle: *Breakfast is in the microwave. Dad.*

I open the microwave and take out the travel mug of fresh coffee and the bacon sandwich, a parcel of love wrapped roughly in aluminium foil. I found a pen and scribbled a reply: *Thanks. Love you.*

I pick up my overnight bag, gather up my breakfast, and start the journey out this place that held a lot of painful memories. Pulling out onto the highway and looking ahead there were nothing but clear blue skies, but as I looked back in the rear-view mirror I could see the clouds that would always tie me to this place being left behind on the horizon.